Xbox Ambassadors build community, reinforce inclusion and positive gaming

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Paul Martin grew up playing video games as a way to do things he couldn’t do in real life: play baseball, walk, fly.

But for a time he stopped engaging in multiplayer titles. It got too toxic, too negative.

For Martin, whose gamertag CerebralPaul#921 is a play on his name and his cerebral palsy, it was too much to deal with people who didn’t know his situation.

“After a while you just you get tired of telling people, ‘I’m doing the best I can. My hands don’t work that good,’” says Martin, 54. “Every time you got into a public match, if you did something that they thought was stupid, you’d hear about it. So after a while, I was done.”
Paul Martin (Photo by Paul Martin)

But he came back to multiplayer games in 2018 and found a volunteer community that accepted and celebrated him for who he is, thanks to the Xbox Ambassadors program.

“I do love multiplayer gaming more than I used to. It allows me to step outside myself and right now, especially with COVID, it’s my social outlet,” says Martin, who’s been enjoying games such as Cyberpunk 2077 and PGA Golf 2K21 on his Xbox Series X since its launch in November. He opened up about his life on livestreams (“Gaming Differently”) and now a weekly podcast on YouTube (“Midweek Gaming”). “I owe a lot of that to the Ambassador program.” They’ve returned the favor, spotlighting him as an Ambassador of the Month.

Martin got to know a lot of Ambassadors, watching their streams and playing games with them. They understood that he was never going to be the best player on the team. It was realistic, in his mind. He appreciated how non-judgmental they were, and how they were able to treat his spasms as a matter of fact, nothing more or less.

“When I first became an Ambassador, my primary focus was on the help forums,” says Martin, who is a freelance PC/IT support technician with decades of experience, now based in Houston. Outside of work, he still volunteers for organizations, such as serving on the board of directors for a therapeutic horseback riding program for people with disabilities. “I just try to go above and beyond as much as I can. A lot of times it’s as simple as correcting bad information. All my life I’ve been involved with communities and I continue to do that. As I became an adult, this is my way of being able to do that while sitting in my house.”
Martin is one of more than 325,000 Xbox Ambassadors around the world.

The program, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, began as a

way for Xbox gamers to help other gamers through troubleshooting, technical support and helping them reach new levels in a title.

https://youtu.be/GYUbvqIMTXQ

From there, it grew into a community that showed up for each other in many other ways, including initiating charity streams, teaching STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to girls and creating relationships with all kinds of gamers around the world, says Lea Natalello, who joined the Xbox staff in 2017 and works closely with the Ambassadors. When she started, there were 50,000 in the community.

“From day one, the Xbox Ambassadors community has always been about the gamer and our fans,” Natalello says. “Then, over time, we started thinking about what the word help really means. We talked to the community and asked them what it meant to be an Ambassador. What we found was that many wanted to give back to the gaming community that had done so much for them. We were able to really grow into this program and community that empowered good gamers to share that goodness as far as they could reach.”

One major way the Xbox staff would engage with the Ambassadors community before the pandemic was through streaming, as they had a dedicated room with high level equipment. While those types of interactions are on temporary hiatus, Ambassadors have been able to help run virtual “play dates” and other events in the meantime.

“The pandemic has showed us that we really wouldn’t be able to manage this community without their help,” Natalello says.
Ideal Ambassadors, she says, have a desire to make gaming fun for everyone.

“At their core, Xbox Ambassadors just have this mindset that everyone deserves to have fun while gaming, regardless of who they are,” she says. “Ambassadors create welcoming and inclusive experiences. From bigger scale efforts like advocating for accessibility or sharing safe gaming habits with friends and families, to creating a Looking for Group (LFG) that brings

new friends together, Xbox Ambassadors are simply good gamers.”

Dhayana Sena standing in front of Xbox accessories (Photo by Dhayana Sena)

Meeting new people was a big motivation for Dhayana Sena, a marketing manager for a company that distributes anime in Australia and New Zealand.

While she grew up with uncles who introduced her early on to Sega and PC games such as Doom, Mortal Kombat III and House of the Dead, the 30-year-old really ramped up her gaming once she started dating a man who worked at a retail store as a games coordinator. He also streamed for Xbox in New Zealand for the ExpertZone GameMaster program.

“We couldn’t do this or that because of his streaming. So many times we’d arrange dates, and he’d have a mission or raid that went on for ages,” says Sena, who was writing movie and comic book reviews at the time. “But, I really enjoyed watching him interact with people on the streams. Right from that moment, I associated Xbox with community.”

She picked up her first Xbox console, the Halo 5 Limited Edition Xbox One and found out many Xbox Ambassadors were also in the GameMaster program. She decided to join the group in late 2016 and has been so involved ever since, she was honored as an Ambassador of the Month in 2019.

“I’m just very taken with meeting new people and being able to share my passions with people who are like minded,” says Sena, who was born and raised in Malaysia and then spent almost two decades in New Zealand before moving to Melbourne in spring 2020 – just before the pandemic lockdowns began. “I grew up in an environment where I was the only major nerd in the

family.”

In recent years, she’s noticed a sense of camaraderie and really strong bonds within the Xbox Ambassadors community, and with the staff as well – a distinct absence of toxicity. And as a woman of color, she’s found the streaming and gaming worlds can be challenging and negative spaces to navigate. But not within the Xbox Ambassadors community.

“There’s no bullying here. When you join, one of the key things is that this is a safe, open place for everyone,” says Sena, who is also active on Twitter and Instagram. “So that instantly puts a really positive spin on it, because you know you’re coming into a community where you’re going to be accepted, regardless of who you are or where you’re from. And that’s really what I love about the program so much. I personally would like to see a lot more diversity and inclusion because that’s definitely something that they’ve been championing a lot, so I’m really keen to see a lot more of that, especially when it comes to people of color and women.”

The idea of expanding inclusion and making the community a safe space is a common thread among Ambassadors in the program.

Marissa Urban holding an Xbox controller (Photo by Marissa Urban)

Marissa Urban grew up with parents who had an Atari, raising her on Pac-Man and other games they'd go at until they won or crashed them. Urban remembers hours on Keystone Capers and Solar Fox. Eventually that progressed to owning every Xbox except the original, and playing all genres of games thanks to Xbox Game Pass: first person shooters (FPS) and role playing games (RPG), music, adventure, puzzles and more.

In high school, she learned how to code, eventually getting certified in systems engineering and networking. In college, she studied nuclear physics and music education. She relished jobs that required crawling through ceilings and installing cables. Now based in Atlanta, she is a consultant whose background includes teaching classes on software and doing one on one tech training for adults, teachers and professors.

"It's such a shift within the tech community to be more inclusive and diverse," says Urban, whose gamertag, SecretAsian29, is an homage to her heritage, which she discovered when she was 19. "I was adopted and it turned out my biological mom is Korean. Being the only blonde in my family, I had no idea."

She became an Xbox Ambassador early on in its existence, finding it through "one of those random nerd rabbit holes," and signed up. Over the years, she volunteered at local children's hospitals, played games with patients (sometimes using features like Copilot to help another player), and partnered with local businesses to host gaming tournaments and fundraisers. She also provided online support for people who would get stuck in games, or needed

a hard reset to their consoles. She passed along tips and tricks she picked up from playing all the time. Eventually she would earn a place as an Ambassador of the Month.

“Being an Xbox Ambassador means a lot to me,” Urban says. “It changed my love of gaming because now I can actually talk, strategize and play with other gamers.”

She’s met people from all over the world through the program, including a good friend in Iran, who introduced her to some of her favorite foods. She also went to conferences and other gaming-themed events. But because of the pandemic in 2020, the usual opportunities to meet people face-to-face have disappeared. But in its place, more people – especially those who aren’t usually able to travel for physical or fiscal reasons – were able to participate in online discussions and panels. An event that in the past may have 70 people at the most could grow to hundreds from all over the globe when the conversation goes digital. It’s something Urban hopes carries over to future events. She can also see the Ambassadors program evolving.

“The program has definitely inspired me in a lot of ways, specifically to take more action toward gaming for everyone. I didn’t realize there was an expectation that girls couldn’t game. It was a very rude awakening,” Urban says. “We’re all trying to figure out like where to go from here. What can we do to create an inclusive environment, whether that’s in real life, or virtually? What can we do to create those environments and foster that space and reach out to more people?”

Eden Hamblin (left) standing with Phil Spencer, Head of Xbox, at X019 in London (photo by Eden Hamblin)

Eden Hamblin, a U.K.-based first responder who found the program as a teenager, has seen it evolve from online support to being more community-based. For four or five consecutive years, Christmas Day was one of his busiest as an Ambassador, as he'd be helping people on live chat as they set up their new consoles.

In 2016, he started streaming for charity through annual GameBlast events, raising money for Special Effect, an organization dedicated to helping people with disabilities enjoy video games. This year's GameBlast charity event is live, with games, challenges and giveaways throughout the stream.

A former teacher, that purpose resonated with the 24-year-old as he remembered seeing children who struggled with playing games suddenly being able to by using technology such as modified joypads, eye-control and the Xbox Adaptive Controller.

In June 2018, he wanted to do even more for Special Effect, so he came up with the idea of making keychains for gamers out of letters and numbers as a distinctive accessory for them – something he hadn't seen for them before. This past holiday season, orders picked up as he shipped them around the world.

Hamblin also reaches out to the gaming community through chats on Xbox Live, charity events and streams, social media and, before the pandemic lockdowns, by bringing Ambassadors together for in-person events at the Microsoft Store in London. These are just a few of the reasons he earned a spot as Ambassador of the

Month.

“None of these have XP (Experience Points) or physical rewards, but personal emotional rewards that make me feel good about the impact I’m having on other gamers and Ambassadors,” Hamblin says. “The Xbox community in some ways is tight knit, friendly; we help each other out. It’s enjoyable to speak to people around the world who enjoy gaming as well and helping others.”

While he’s always appreciative of the online community generated through Xbox, he is looking forward to when it’ll be safe to meet up with people face to face again, as many of his friends in real life play with him online daily.

“Being able to physically meet the people that you speak with online and have a conversation, go out for a meal with these people, it makes it more of a reality.”

Lead image: Illustration of four profiled Xbox Ambassadors by Karl Juridico.